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SUBJECT: GDRC WANTS ORDERLY RETURN OF REFUGEES FROM BURUNDI

REF: BUJUMBURA 548

¶1. (U) Minister of Communication Lambert Mende announced on October 8 that the GDRC was temporarily closing its border with Burundi to "avoid anarchy," as DRC refugees moved to return to the DRC (reftel). Press reports indicated that 480 refugees were turned away attempting to cross into the DRC. MONUC told PolCouns that as many as 1,000 people are poised to return at the moment. Congolese officials, while welcoming the return of their compatriots in general, cautioned that an orderly return could only be effected through the Burundi-DRC-UNHCR tripartite framework. South Kivu Vice-Governor Jean Claude Kibala announced that tripartite officials would meet as soon as possible to organize "a dignified return" for the DRC refugees.

¶2. (SBU) Mohamed Toure, UNHCR Deputy Representative for Protection told PolCouns on October 8 that UNHCR was in a difficult situation. Legally, UNHCR cannot block refugees from voluntarily returning home, nor can it ask a country to close its borders. However, UNHCR would strongly recommend against any returns to South Kivu at the moment, due to escalating fighting between FARDC and FDLR forces. Toure remarked that most of the refugees are Banyamulenge who want to return to the Haut Plateau, which would require several days walk through a conflict zone. Toure said that the best solution would be for the refugees to wait until such time as some sort of UNHCR convoy could be arranged to transport the refugees home.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: UNHCR is correct to counsel a "go-slow" approach. Under Kimia II military operations, there has been increasing instability in the Uvira region just across the Burundian border. Unprotected refugee movements through the conflict zone would only invite exactions by the FDLR and FARDC. End comment.
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